

MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCES.

FROM time to time the newspapers furnish accounts of persons who, without any obvious cause, suddenly disappear from their homes, leaving no trace behind them, and generally baffling all the machinery set in motion for the purpose of discovering their whereabouts. It is doubtless true that in some instances the disappearance is simply flight from disagreeable surroundings or from threatening ills; in others there has been suicide or foul play; but when all these causes have been allowed for, there still remains a large residuum of cases for which no explanation is offered. It is to this class that I propose to devote the present paper.

The most characteristic feature of the subjects of this variety of mysterious disappearances is the fact that when they return home, or otherwise make themselves known, they profess to be entirely oblivious of every circumstance that has occurred to them during their absence; and yet inquiry shows that they have acted in an apparently conscious manner, exhibiting no indications of mental derangement or symptoms of disease. The following instances will give an idea of the phenomena of their mental state much fuller than can be obtained from any didactic description.

A gentleman who was engaged in active business as a manufacturer, and who had served during the late civil war, had suffered for several months with head symptoms of no great degree of severity, but which were sufficient to make him at times indisposed to mental exertion. Thus he had had slight pain in the forehead, occasional attacks of vertigo, and had rarely slept well. One morning, after having passed a restless night, though there had been no marked symptoms of any kind, he left his office at about nine o'clock, telling a friend that he was going to a florist's to buy some tulip bulbs. He remained absent for eight days,

during which time his friends, notwithstanding all their efforts, were unable to find him. He was tracked all over the city, and, as he had lost an arm in the war, this was no difficult matter, but the detectives that were set to search for him were always an hour or more behind him, and finally all indications of him were lost. It was ascertained that he had been to hotels, where he had slept, to shops, where he had made purchases, to billiard saloons, where he had played several games, and to theaters. Subsequently it was discovered that he had, on the fifth day, left New York by the Lehigh Valley Railroad, and had gone as far as Easton, Pennsylvania. Here he had lost his ticket, and not being able to give a satisfactory account of himself, and refusing to purchase another ticket, he was put off the train. He had then returned to New York, had passed the night at a hotel in the lower part of the city, and on the eighth day, at about ten o'clock, made his appearance at his office. He had no recollection of any event that had occurred after he had left his place of business, eight days previously, till he awoke on the morning after his return, and found himself in a hotel at which he was a stranger. It was ascertained beyond question that in all this time his actions had been, to all appearance, entirely correct, that his speech was coherent, and that he had acted, in all respects, as any man in the full possession of his mental faculties would have acted. He had drank nothing but a glass of ale, which he took with some oysters at a restaurant in Sixth Avenue.

Another instance that also came under my own observation was that of a gentleman, a partner in a large mercantile house, who was the subject of epilepsy. One morning he left his office at about eleven o'clock, for the purpose of getting a signature to a paper from a gentleman whose place of business was distant a few minutes' walk. Not returning by three o'clock, inquiry was made, and it was ascertained that he had visited the office, obtained the signature, and had departed in apparently good health before half-past eleven. He did not make his appearance at his own office till nearly five o'clock. The last thing that he recollected was passing St. Paul's Church, at the corner of Broadway and Vesey Street, just as the congregation was coming out after morning service. He was then on his way to obtain the signa-

ture he wanted. It was subsequently ascertained that after accomplishing his errand he had gone to Brooklyn; had visited a newspaper office and purchased a paper; had then returned to New York, entered an omnibus at Fulton Ferry, left it at the corner of Twenty-third Street and Fifth Avenue, entered the Fifth Avenue Hotel, and while there had recovered his recollection. During his wanderings he had acted in a perfectly correct manner. He had conversed with several persons, who, however, did not know him, and all bore testimony to the fact that his language was direct and coherent, and that there was apparently nothing out of the way with him. But for about six hours his mind had been in a state far removed in many respects from its normal condition. His purposes were different from those that he had previously entertained. He had not lost consciousness, but he had acquired a state of consciousness which, though not continuous with that which was natural to him, differed from it in no essential respects. If this gentleman had gone away on a long journey during the existence of this abnormal condition, and if, instead of lasting only six hours, it had continued as many weeks, we should have had the newspapers of the day reporting another case of mysterious disappearance.

In still another case quite recently under my care, the patient, a gentleman about forty years old, had received in his youth a blow on the head, by which the skull was fractured. Several years subsequently mild epileptiform paroxysms were developed. During the early part of February, 1885, his business, that of an insurance adjuster, required him to go to Indianapolis from his residence in Ohio. He remembered nothing after falling in the station just before starting till he found himself in Albany, New York, in April, nearly two months subsequent to his disappearance. During all this time he had acted consistently, and given no reason for any one to suppose that he was not in his right mind. After this he made several similar disappearances, the last occurring in August, 1886. On this occasion he suddenly left his home in Cincinnati, and three weeks afterward found himself at a hotel in Baltimore. During his residence in that city he had behaved properly in every respect. He had lived quietly, paid his bills regularly, and

impressed all with whom he came in contact with his gentlemanly manners. The whole period was, however, to him a perfect blank.

Such instances as those I have detailed are by no means uncommon. They show that it is possible for a person, under certain disordered conditions of the nervous system, to live, as it were, two essentially distinct lives. Cases of this dual existence have been reported by MM. Aznam * and Mesnet, † and others have occurred in this country. In all of them the subjects have had paroxysms, characterized by a sudden change in their modes of life and personal qualities, and during the continuance of which they had no recollection of their normal lives. Their likes and dislikes were different, their dispositions were changed, they were, in all respects, so far as their minds were concerned, totally unlike what they had been. When they emerged from this abnormal state they resumed their former manners, habits, and modes of thought, and were in entire ignorance of anything that had occurred while the seizure lasted; indeed, unconscious that there had been the slightest departure from the ordinary course of their lives.

Another circumstance existing in all these cases is even more remarkable than any that has been mentioned. Let it be supposed that the normal states of the mind are represented by the sign +, and the abnormal states by the sign —. Now, the subject, when in the + state, recollects every event that occurred to him during all the other + states, and when he is in the — state he recollects all the events of all other — states. But he has no recollection, when in either a + or — state, of any circumstance that has taken place in an alternate state. All his + states are homogeneous with each other, as are also all his — states, but all + states are heterogeneous with all — states. Thus he leads two distinct lives, and is, to all intents and purposes, two separate persons. As + he may be a very good man, kind and amiable, free from bad habits, and beloved by all with whom he comes in contact. As — he may be desperately wicked, prone

* "Annales Médico-psychologiques," July, 1876. "Amnésie périodique, on dédoublement de la vie."

† "Union Médicale," July 21 and 24, 1874.

to steal everything on which he can lay his hands, brutal, drunken, worthless, and hated by all who know him. Sometimes these two states alternate with great regularity. There are cases on record in which the +, or normal, state always lasted a fixed period, then the -, or abnormal, state ensued and continued for a like time, and so on, through the whole life of the subject. If, for instance, a person is in the + state, and while engaged in some particular work the - state is suddenly developed, the work is at once stopped, but at the instant of the resumption of the + state it is taken up at the exact point at which it was discontinued, and carried on as though there had been no interruption.

Now, to apply these facts to the strange disappearances that are frequently reported in the newspapers, and for which no adequate motive is alleged. In one of these, that occurred a few months ago, a gentleman, member of a prominent business firm, suddenly disappeared. His horse and buggy were found standing in the street, but there was no trace of the owner. His accounts were perfectly correct, and there was no domestic or other trouble to explain his absence. A reward was offered for his apprehension, or for his body, if dead. It was generally supposed that he had been foully dealt with. Finally, his wife, believing herself to be a widow, broke up her establishment, and went to reside with her mother. But on the 2d of last December he suddenly returned, having been away seven months. He stated that nearly the whole period of absence was a perfect blank to him. He recollected nothing after leaving his buggy, in order to find men for some work he was having done, till he awoke to consciousness in a railway car in Kansas City, Missouri, with a through ticket for San Francisco in his pocket. He found that his forehead had been cut, and at first he thought he had been robbed, but nothing had been taken from him, and the presumption was that the wound in his head had been caused by a fall. A feeling that he would not be able to account satisfactorily for his disappearance caused him to continue his journey. He arrived at San Francisco quite ill, and was confined to his room for a month. Finally he mustered up sufficient courage to return to his home.

The other case occurred in this city. A bookkeeper in a mercantile house left his place of business on November 1st of last year, apparently intending to be absent but for a short time, as his books remained open on his desk, and he had not put on an overcoat that hung in the office. Nothing was heard from him till December 7th, when a letter written by him, and dated Washington, was received by a member of the firm that employed him. In the meantime it was ascertained that his books and papers were in perfect order, and no cause for his absence could be discovered. Circulars containing his portrait, and offering a reward for his discovery, were sent to the police of various cities and posted in public places. But all was in vain, as not a trace of him was brought to light till the reception of the letter, more than a month after his disappearance. In this communication he stated that he was well and in full possession of his faculties. He did not know how or why he had left home, and had no knowledge of the events of the last month. The return of his reasoning powers had been gradual, and when he found himself in a strange city and among strangers he was unable to account for the circumstance. The fact that he had caused sorrow and suffering to all who were dear to him was unbearable. He had learned from the newspapers that he was thought to have been killed, or to have purposely run away, and this added to his distress. On regaining his normal consciousness he had at once started to join his wife, who, soon after his disappearance, had gone to her friends in Iowa. This gentleman's habits were most exemplary, and there was no reason to doubt the truth of his story.

It would be very easy to give many other instances of a like character to those quoted, but the foregoing are probably sufficient to show the general features of the sudden disappearances of the type referred to in this paper. It is scarcely to be doubted that had the cases of well-marked double existence that have been thoroughly observed, and that have been cited in this paper, been characterized by a disposition to travel, they would have come under the head of mysterious disappearances, and have been the subjects of wonder with all acquainted with the superficial circumstances of the occurrences. The condition in question

was noticed by Wigan,* in a work now almost forgotten, but which contains more food for reflection and more sound psychology than are to be found in the writings of more pretentious persons of the present day. Wigan says:

“We have examples, then, of persons who, from some hitherto unexplained cause, fall suddenly into and remain for a time in a state of existence resembling somnambulism, from which, after many hours, they gradually awake, having no recollection of anything that has occurred in the preceding state, although during its continuance they have read, written, and conversed, and done many other acts implying an exercise, however limited, of the understanding; they sing, or play on an instrument, and yet, on the cessation of the paroxysm, are quite unconscious of everything that has taken place. They now pursue their ordinary business and avocations in the usual manner, perhaps for weeks, when suddenly the somnambulist state recurs, during which all that had happened in the previous attack comes vividly before them, and they remember it as perfectly as if that disordered state were the regular habitual mode of existence of the individual; the healthy state and its events being now as entirely forgotten as were the disordered ones during the healthy state. Thus it passes on for many months or even years. This is what is called ‘double consciousness,’ or, as I prefer to name it, ‘alternate consciousness;’ the person being, in a manner, two individuals, as far as sensation and bodily identity are concerned.”

Persons affected in this manner are, of course, difficult to find after they have absented themselves, for they have entered upon a life that is altogether new to them. The new state of consciousness into which they have passed has no relation with their former lives, and therefore, unless they should happen accidentally to stumble across some one who knows them, they would escape detection. Their conversation is about circumstances which have no connection with their past lives; their habits and ways are not such as they have previously shown; they have, probably influenced by new ideas of what is suitable, done all in their power to change their personal appearance. Hence the most minute description, accompanied by photographs, fails to lead to the discovery of their identity. Suddenly they pass into their normal state of consciousness, and then they are astounded to perceive their strange associations, and to learn that they have been living a life all the events of which are outside the pale of their normal existence.

* “The Duality of the Mind,” p. 391. London: 1844.

That the mind is dual is a theory which is supported by many facts in the anatomy, physiology, and pathology of the brain. Under ordinary circumstances, these two parts are manifested simultaneously—the two hemispheres of which the brain is composed act together. But under the influence of injury or disease this concord of action is disturbed, and one hemisphere acts at one time and one at another. So far as is known, every person in whom there has been the condition of alternate or double consciousness has received some wound involving the brain, or has suffered previously or at the same time from cerebral derangement, generally epileptic in character. Many of the phenomena of certain aborted forms of epilepsy are in all essential respects identical with those of double consciousness, and it often happens that this last-named state is accompanied by commonplace epileptic convulsions. It is not, therefore, too much to say that those persons in whom two distinct conditions of consciousness are shown to exist and those who suddenly disappear from their homes and as suddenly find that they have been unconscious of their acts, are affected with epilepsy, and that under the treatment proper for this disease the dual existence would cease and the impulse to run away be abolished.

WILLIAM A. HAMMOND.



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Dr. Hammond thinks
Dr. Wigan's name is
the better one.



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